

#186 JOSEPH NUCKOLS: 55TH COAST ARTILLERY

Bart Fredo (BF): . . . interview is with Joseph Nuckols, was conducted on December 4, 1986, at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel, at about 8:30 in the evening. Mr. Nuckols now lives in Mechanicsville, Virginia. I'm doing the interview, my name is Bart Fredo and also with me is Mark Tanaka-Sanders, who's with the National Park Service.

Let me start off by asking you to tell us your name and where you were from back in 1941.

Joseph Nuckols (JN): My name is Joseph. The middle name is SHE-RILL, Knuckles. I'm now a Senior. At that time, in 1941, there was no Senior attached to it. I was stationed at Fort Ruger, a member of the 55th Coast Artillery [Regiment], which had a reputation as the old Boston Fusiliers. At that time, our alert position was on Sand Island, which is a small island in the mouth of this Honolulu Harbor. It is now a peninsula joined by land or a drawbridge, to the main part of Honolulu.

BF: Just so we have it on the tape, so everyone knows, what was your hometown back in 1941?

JN: My hometown was Richmond, Virginia. I'm from, I'm a Southern boy from way down south, down where the south begins, the Mason-Dixon line. That's what they call it.

BF: When did you come to Hawaii?

JN: I came to Hawaii, enlisted in the service, October the third, 1940. I arrived in Honolulu on Christmas Eve of 1940, and was sent to Fort Derussy for my basic training. From there, I was assigned to the 55th coast artillery stationed at Fort Ruger.

BF: What was your rank?

JN: At . . .

BF: Forty-one, in 1941.

JN: I was a T-4, that was what they call a technician, fourth class, which was one stripe up with a T in the middle and four stripes down.

BF: And your job was?

JN: At that time, my job was to run a personnel boat from Pier 1, which was where Fort Armstrong was, from Pier 1 to Sand Island. Sand Island, as I explained, at that time, was an island. It was not connected to the main island whatsoever. Whenever military equipment had to be transported over, we'd do it from barge from Pier 4. And we had a lowering ramp over on the island, which we could lower to get access to the island.

BF: Let me take you to the morning of the attack. Before the attack started, what were you doing and where were you?

JN: Okay. My job, as I said, was to operate this personnel boat from Pier 1, at Fort Armstrong, to Sand Island. Each night, we would have a curfew time. The last boat would be 10:30 at night. If the fellows were from the outfit, stationed on Sand Island, were in town, and they got back later than 10:30, they usually slept on the dock, whatever provisions they could make for themselves to sleep until the next morning. And my first visit, trip over to Sand Island, would be at seven o'clock in the morning.

On the morning of December the seventh, I awoke with a bunch of guys that had been all gassed up the night before in the town of Honolulu, waiting to be transported back to the island. At that time, the Army had not been alerted that anything was going on.

We waited around until about 7:30 to get all the guys in and we started back across to Sand Island, when we noticed all the smoke and fire, and of course, we could hear nothing, but we saw all this happening across Sand Island -- Pearl Harbor was approximately eight miles across. Honolulu International Airport wasn't there then. There was a small airport, called John Rogers Airport, which was adjacent to Hickam Field, which Hickam Field then was next to Pearl Harbor.

And so going across, I, my duty, the morning of December the seventh, was to transport a guy, a bunch of gassed GIs back to the island that had missed the boat the night before, Saturday night. As we arrived at the dock, an alert had been sounded and a Lieutenant Spangler ordered everyone to man positions at their gun. Our commanding officer at the time was a Captain Charles B. Cox.

So we all went to our guns and in total astonishment, we didn't know what was happening. We had no idea what was going on.

BF: You just saw all this smoke over Pearl Harbor?

JN: We saw the smoke, and we knew that there was an alert. We hadn't been notified that we were under attack by the Japanese Air Force.

Just upon arriving at Sand Island, just a few moments afterwards, an alert was sounded at Fort Armstrong and we got word that Pearl Harbor was under attack. The Navy, at that time, had a submarine net which stretched from Sand Island to Pier 1. The submarine net is a net that is made out of huge steel weaving. And they have --- it lies on the harbor when nothing is going on, but in case the close the harbor, you have big winches on each side that pull this net closed, and that closes your harbor off so that no missiles or submarines at that time, or anything, could get into the harbor.

At the same time, when the alert was sounded, the net, the Navy pulled the net. A Dutch boat -- and I can't pronounce the name, JA-HAR-GAS-SEN [*Jagersfontein*], or something like that -- if you go in the archives of Pearl Harbor, you'll find that -- was entering the harbor, but it couldn't get in. It was just in the channel. Europe, being in the war, at that time, most shipping was armed.

BF: Armed?

JN: Armed. It had -- well, what this boat had on was pom-pom guns, which I'd have never heard of before.

BF: Anti-aircraft weapons?

JN: Right. Now tied up at Pier 4, which is adjacent to the power station that supplies the electrical power for Pearl, for the city of Honolulu, was a U.S. Coast Guard boat, the *TANEY*. And by the way, the *TANEY* has still been in commission to this day. It is being decommissioned December the seventh, 1986, in Portsmouth, Virginia. But the Coast Guard boat, the *TANEY*, which had anti-aircraft guns on it, and we had four three-inch anti-aircraft guns on Sand Island. And so when we were alerted, we went into a battle alert on the ridge.

Now, how come we had ammunition at our guns on Sand Island, on November the twenty-seventh of 1941, the whole Hawaiian military force went on alert. The Navy pulled out of Pearl Harbor and formed what they called a mighty band of steel around the harbor. I mean, around the islands. And the Marines, they went on alert and built pillboxes down in Honolulu and went to the reservoirs and had pillboxes set up and manned, and live ammunition issued. All the ammunition was taken out of the guns, out of the magazines and put to the guns. And that's how come, because of the thing of transporting by barge, we had ammunition on Sand Island that morning.

So when we were alerted, the first wave of planes came in over Punchbowl, and all three outfits, F-55 [55th Coast Artillery Regiment], of the coast artillery, the Coast Guard boat, the *TANEY*, and the Dutch boat, opened gun, uncovered its pom-pom guns and we all opened up.

BF: How many planes did you see?

JN: A squadron, I don't know. I cannot tell you exactly the number. We have credit of downing two Japanese planes out of the first wave that came over.

BF: What kind of gun were you operating?

JN: A three-inch anti-aircraft gun. I was the number one man on a three-inch anti-aircraft gun.

BF: Were these planes attempting to strafe or attack you in any way?

JN: No way. When they came in, we opened up. The Navy barracks facilities that operated the submarine net was the only casualty on the island. Now whether that was a bomb from the Japanese Navy, or whether it was a projectile from Pearl Harbor coming over, I don't know. But that was the only building, or the only damage, and there was a few -- no man in my outfit was injured.

BF: Briefly tell me about shooting down the planes.

JN: Well, as I said, when, when all outfits, the *TANEY*, the JA-HAR-GAS-SEN [*JAGERSFONTEIN*], the boat and our outfit, when we opened up, we put up one hell of a barrage. And two planes came down. Who got the credit, I don't know. We didn't get any citation that we did, but we did get credit that we were the only harbor defense outfit in the Hawaiian Islands that brought down any planes that day.

BF: Did you seem --- did you see the planes hit?

JN: I saw the planes demolished.

BF: Did they hit the water or land?

JN: I saw debris hit the water, yes.

BF: Did you see any pilots bail out?

JN: I saw no pilot bail out.

BF: How long did this last, this firing?

JN: It really is hard for me to put an exact time on it. At a time like that, when anxiety is built up and your adrenaline is flowing, you don't stop and look at a watch. I can't give you an exact moment.

BF: How about an estimate?

JN: An estimate, I would say less than thirty minutes. From the sighting of the planes, until the downing, I would say it was less than thirty minutes, an estimate.

BF: Were planes overhead throughout that period?

JN: All right. The squadron that we fired on dispersed. We had information later from our BC station, which are known as battery command stations. In artillery, you have three, you have a base station, you have two stations on the outline that gives you azimuth and deflection, and so forth, to fire from. We had noticed later that another squadron of planes were coming in. If they did, they veered off. They must have had word something was waiting for them.

I do believe, definitely, that between the three outfits, the *TANEY*, the Coast Guard boat, and our outfit, that we saved Honolulu Harbor. Pearl Harbor was devastated. Had the shipping that was in the harbor that day been sunk, there would have been no place for supplies from the mainland to come into the harbor. I definitely believe we were a turning point in the war progressing further out in the Pacific.

BF: What's your most vivid memory of that morning?

JN: The most vivid memory is probably really common, because as we were coming across -- as I told you, I started out from Pier 1 -- and as we were coming across in the boat, one GI. who was probably still a little inebriated, raised up and said, "What the, hiccup, hell is happening now?"

We probably figured that the Navy was holding maneuvers on Sunday and something had gone amuck.

BF: The rest of that morning, and into the afternoon, what did you do?

JN: Well, the rest of that morning and into the afternoon, we were a very scared bunch of people. Anything, we were told that anything that was in the air was enemy. A few planes, American planes, P-40s, had gotten up over at Bellows Field. For some reason, the Japanese did not hit Bellows Field. These planes had gotten up and they had probably been on reconnaissance and when they

came back over the island, we opened fire on them. Excuse me. Luckily, I don't think we brought any down, but there was smoke trailing from some when they went out of sight.

So we were in this complete state of confusion. As you know, Honolulu Harbor at that time was warehouses. All the piers were warehouses, where all the shipping come in. So the Army put men on patrol, over on guard duty. And as the men would go around the building, they, they were challenging each other as to, "Halt, who is there?"

It was utter confusion. We didn't know whether we were -- there were rumors upon rumors that we were going to be invaded.

BF: Did you ever get challenged?

JN: Personally, no. A challenge to my personal injury, no. No. They . . .

BF: So you went over through the rest of the day more or less along those lines.

JN: In utter confusion. And there were alerts sounded, it seemed to me, every five minutes. We would be alerted and we would go back to the guns and scan the skies and wait to see. And then we had, also on the island, we had what they call F-55 [55th Coast Artillery Regiment] guns. They were known as Long Tom guns that were stationed for coast artillery protection. And we hadn't been manning those guns because we were alerted that we were going to be invaded and we were trying to be prepared for anything that would take place. But as I said, it was utter confusion.

BF: Did you see any casualties, any U.S. casualties?

JN: The only U.S. casualties, as I told you -- no man in my outfit was hurt -- when whatever this projectile was that went into the Navy barracks, there were men injured. How severely, I don't know. Whether there were any fatalities, I do not know.

BF: Briefly, what were the next few days like?

JN: Briefly, the next few days was everything. We were under strict alert and the -- as far as I'm concerned, I was stationed right there at the island, and under complete military restriction, war time status. They were men from my outfit that were sent out to Hickam Field and to the other places, and they, I guess, trying to get what damage they could together and really I don't know what their status was.

BF: How long did you stay in Hawaii after the attack?

JN: I stayed in Hawaii until 1945, but not directly in Hawaii. What happened, I went in, I enlisted into a ranger training out at Schofield Barracks. I transferred and went out there. And I was assigned to an outfit and we went down to the Gilbert Islands. Now, I was stationed on a little island that you've probably never heard of called Abemama, which was just between Makin and Tarawa. When the Marines went into Tarawa and Roosevelt's rangers went into Makin, well the island of Abemama in the Gilbert -- I don't think there were less than, there were less than a hundred Japanese on the

island. And they went in there and the Seabees built runways there and we garrisoned the island and protected it so that they could have runways for their planes -- they had the B-25s, the first guns that had those seventy-five millimeter guns on it -- where we could go into -- at that time, you had to have, we didn't have jets that could fly so many thousand miles. We had planes that could only, that had a limit. And so you had to have stepping stones. You had an air, have an air strip on islands to go ahead for your . . .

BF: What I'm driving at is you spent a good bit of time throughout the war in Hawaii.

JN: Right.

BF: How did martial law affect your life?

JN: Honestly . . .

BF: Restrictions . . .

JN: Honestly, I can't say that really affected my life because when I came back from the Gilbert Islands, I was assigned the Army at that time, started a service called special service. That was a unit connected with USO. That's not like the special service troops today that have gung-ho. We were an entertainment group. And I was given a job which was the softest job the Army could give me. I was given the job as an entertainment director for the harbor defense of Honolulu. I was stationed at Fort Ruger again, under the command of Captain Troy A. Barker, who was a terrific guy. He was one of the guys on the Powell leading team of Alabama. And we were a special service outfit.

My job then was to escort troops, USO troops that came over to the islands for the different outposts to entertain the men. And in those days, when the big troops didn't come in, what we would do, we would pick up little local hula troops. Mrs. Lena Guerreira, a famous person in Hawaii in that day had a little hula troop of girls and I would pick her troop up and take them to the outposts all around the island to entertain the men. And they had, they brought in these sixteen millimeter cameras and they would have the feature films on that and I would truck these things back up to the outposts and Diamond Head, and over to Koko Head, and Kolekole pass, and Nanakuli Beach, where the different outfits were stationed, to give the guys some sort of entertainment.

BF: What did you do when you went on liberty? Where did you go? Do you remember the names of any places?

JN: Well, now, after the war, the . . .

BF: No, I'm talking strictly during the war.

JN: Yeah, right. During the war, I mean after the attack, and after when, when, our forces weren't at war, there was not a heck of a lot to do. I mean you could come to town. We all had to have (mumbles) had to wear complete Army uniform at all times. And there was not really a lot to do. You could come down to the old Waikiki Theater and go to a show. At that time, the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, the Navy took that over and made it a R & R for the, for the Navy. The old Ala Moana Hotel was here. I think they were still broadcasting

"Hawaii Calls" from there. Then there was the old famous Waikiki Tavern. So we'd all go down there and get gassed up and go back to the battery. That was just about what you'd do.

BF: And how about Hotel Street? Any of the names, just names . . .

JN: Hotel Street! I was a famous member of Hotel Street back in those days. You want to know the new Senator Hotel, the Mountain? I can name off probably some of the hotels. They had a wonderful bunch of gals there and they just kept the boys kind of happy. And then they did a pretty good job too. They were real morale blowers. I have to say that. But soon after the war started, they were closed down, so it was back to the sixteen-millimeter camera and the hula troops, and even me singing. And brother, I'll tell you, they pulled --- I'll bet you I sang "San Antone Rose" about 10,000 times. (Chuckles)

BF: Why don't you stop it now? Let's change, yeah, if it's that close, let's just stop it.

(Taping stops, then resumes)

BF: Okay. Let's go back to these Japanese planes that you saw. Very briefly, from what direction were they coming and where were they heading?

JN: The Japanese planes were coming from over Punchbowl, headed for the harbor.

BF: Honolulu Harbor?

JN: Honolulu Harbor. They came over Punchbowl. If you're familiar with the geography of Honolulu, they came over Punchbowl, right in for the harbor to make the pass there.

BF: There's no question in your mind. It looked like they wanted to attack there?

JN: No question. They come in for that. That was their purpose.

BF: Later that day, when you saw the American P-40s out of Bellows, where were they coming from and going to?

JN: They were coming from sea and they flew directly over the island . . .

BF: That's Sand Island.

JN: Sand Island, and geographically, I would say that they were flying towards Ewa.

BF: Ewa.

JN: Ewa, where the Marine base there.

BF: So they weren't returning, it didn't look like they were returning to Bellows . . .

JN: No.

BF: . . . which is the other direction.

JN: Bellows was on the other side, northward side of Honolulu.

BF: So they're coming from the sea, over Sand Island, heading towards Ewa.

JN: That's my interpretation. That's the way I saw it.

BF: Okay. Some people who survived the attack that day on December 7, still have some bad feeling about Japan and about the Japanese. How do you feel?

JN: A Japanese soldier was the same as an American soldier. We were enlisted in the service to do a job for our country. And if I'd have been a Japanese, I'd have been fighting Americans. I was an American, I was fighting the Japanese. I did not go into the islands and see some of the terrible tragedies and some of the horror stories and some of the tortures, and had I seen that, I might have a different concept of it. But I figured they were doing the same thing I was doing. They had a job to do and they were doing it.

BF: If you had a . . .

JN: Luckily we won. Thank god.

BF: If you had the opportunity to talk with Japanese war veterans, how would you feel about that?

JN: I have animosity in my heart against no one. No one. And if I talk to a Japanese veteran, I would talk to him the same as I am talking to you.

BF: Nothing else you want? 'Cause he's going to be gone. Oh, okay, all right, thank you.

MARK Tanaka-Sanders (MTS): Good story.

BF: Thank you. Don't stand up yet.

JK: Okay.

BF: Because you're wired.

JN: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW